Encouraging Teacher Engagement: A New Approach to Performance Improvement in Schools

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Today's teachers work in an environment that requires them to meet a multitude of expectations from students, parents, principals, and the community. With the spotlight increasingly on school performance, there is a need for educational leaders to build an authentic learning climate. The fully engaged teacher leader is central to this climate. This paper discusses a model in which collaboration, collegiality, along with psychological empowerment, are critical contributors to authentic, engaging, and empowering learning environments.

Keywords: Collaboration, Learning, Performance Improvement

The pressure on teachers today is intense. While working under increasing scrutiny and public dissatisfaction with the quality of education, schools are coping with daily challenges such as staff shortages, varying levels of parental involvement, decaying facilities, and the threat of violence. Students, as always, have a diversity of skills and needs. It is clear that old ways of leadership may not be sufficient to meet these challenges. Although Normore (2004) concedes that it is difficult to know how schools of the future will differ from current models, he states, "Yet, there is little doubt that these new millennium schools will require different forms of leadership—one that combines a force of shared leadership and values" (p. 3). Begley (2001) agrees that values-informed leadership is what is needed and defines such leadership as "sophisticated, knowledge-based, and skillful" (p. 354). Acquiring sophistication is described as "a function of understanding the influence of personal values on the actions of individuals and the influence of values on organizational and social practices" (Begley, p. 353). Part of this focus on values requires that leaders invite others to take ownership of a vision and a set of values (Yankelovich, 1999).

> The role (of principal) must be shared to the point when principals leave the job they have left behind *teacher leaders* [italics added] who can provide ongoing continuity to the school and district where all students learn—which is a moral purpose of the highest order. (Normore, 2004, pp. 8-9)

This basic premise of involvement is echoed by Fullan (2005) who emphasizes that leadership involves developing leaders throughout the system. Fink and Resnick (2001) state that the purpose of such programs must be "creating a corps of strong instructional leaders who share a common set of commitments to teaching and learning, along with a sense of belonging to an effective and demanding professional community" (p. 598). Working together on common issues and problems can facilitate the development of a collaborative spirit (Health & Sias, 1999). This spirit can lead to collaborative advantage, gained when partners develop synergies from their collaboration (Huxham & Vangen, 2004).

The discussion in this paper focuses on the importance of cultivating collaboration with and among teachers, resulting in the emergence of authenticity in the school culture and the classroom learning environment. Authentic pedagogy has been shown to boost academic performance for students of all social backgrounds (Newmann, Marks, & Gamoran, 1995). We propose that teacher engagement, and specifically the development of teacher leaders, is a key component in any effort to improve performance in today's schools. After a review of relevant literature, we present a model in which collaboration $\rightarrow$ psychological empowerment $\rightarrow$ engagement. Authenticity, which emerges from collaboration, also moderates the quality and extent of perceptions of psychological empowerment (see Figure 1, p. 5).

Leadership and Authenticity

Several authors (Deal & Peterson, 1999; Lieberman & Miller, 2004; Starratt, 2004) have introduced the role of teachers as leaders in affecting change and achieving school improvement. According to their study of teacher leaders, Miles, Saxl, and Lieberman found that the experiences of teacher leaders gave them new insights into the organizational realities of teaching in schools. They also had learned a new cluster of skills, including "building trust and rapport, making an organizational diagnosis, using resources, managing the work, and building skill and

confidence in others" (as cited in Lieberman & Miller, p. 16). Many teacher leaders were involved in "the work of reshaping the culture of [their] schools,…[transforming] conditions for teaching and learning,…[and building] a new collaborative culture" (Lieberman & Miller, p. 25). According to Lieberman and Miller, teachers who lead (a) are strongly committed to their students, (b) inspire their colleagues by their constant curiosity about and struggle to improve their pedagogical skills, (c) exemplify lifelong learning, (d) experiment and challenge their comfort zones by taking risks, and (e) discover leadership through humility and collaboration with colleagues. Finally, for teacher leadership to become a reality, Lieberman and Miller caution that "teachers must be given real support for their work, [including altering the school culture] to accommodate these new roles" (p. 17).

To distinguish this type of leadership from the characterizations of leadership in the popular press, Starratt's (2004) work on ethical educational leadership provides us with three key distinctives. For Starratt, learning is a moral activity requiring that teachers and students be fully engaged in the learning process. And so educational leadership is committed to high quality learning for every student based on three virtues: "proactive *responsibility*; personal and professional *authenticity*; and an affirming, critical, and enabling *presence* to the workers and the work involved in teaching and learning" (Starratt, back cover).

Proactive Responsibility

According to Starratt (2004), educational leaders are responsible for creating and maintaining relationships between a diverse list of stakeholders (e.g., students, parents, teachers, school board). However, he is clear to note that these various stakeholders have to be responsible for themselves. Of import to this discussion is the responsibility for educational leaders to nurture and sustain authentic learning environments. As for teachers, they must remain authentic by acknowledging and acting upon the responsibility to stay up-to-date with the developments in their field (Starratt).

Personal and Professional Authenticity

Authenticity. "Authenticity emerges through meaningful relations" (Barab, Squire, & Dueber, 2000, p. 42) "as participants engage in practices of value to themselves and to others in the community at large" (p. 56). The task has to have "meaning and significance to all parties, and…[address a legitimate] real-world need" (Barab et al., p. 43). Therefore, one can see how collaboration on meaningful projects can lead to authentic relationships within a school setting.

From Spreitzer's (1992, 1995, 1996) work on psychological empowerment (presented below), participation in a decision-making process (e.g., collaborating on a meaningful project) by staff is correlated to individual cognitions of empowerment which, in turn, is positively correlated to increased satisfaction, greater motivation and engagement, and more innovative and creative behavior. The resultant effects in the classroom are authentic teachers who are actively engaged in authentic relationships with learners, working together in an authentic learning process (Starratt, 2004). According to Starratt, on an individual level, authenticity is realized through dialogue. We learn who we are through the dialogue (i.e., collaboration) that occurs in our family, our neighborhood, with friends, and in other social environments (e.g., schools).

Authentic leadership. According to Begley (2001), authentic leadership is genuine, and is "a hopeful, open-ended, visionary and creative response to social circumstances" (p. 354). Authentic leaders "always act with the good of others in view,…[believing] deeply in people and their abilities to make ordinary things into great things" (Duignan, as cited in Starratt, 2004, p. 71). Thus leaders who are authentic play an important role in the educational enterprise.

Presence

As humans are relational beings, we are present to others through such media as language and body expressions (Starratt, 2004). Presence has a much deeper meaning than merely being near someone. Being fully present means being actively aware of what's around you; listening, observing, feeling, and being in touch with others. Starratt introduced three types of presence: (1) Affirming presence (an affirmation of the other's right to be who they are), (2) critical presence (an enduring disposition that acknowledges and responds with compassion and hope to encounters with others not open to authenticity and dialogue), and (3) enabling presence (a concern with building capacities to improve learning). It is easy to see how an affirming presence would welcome disengaged students to the classroom. A critical presence would also be instrumental in educating this same group of students, as would an enabling presence that encourages their learning and development. Similarly, teachers need to encourage students "to be more fully present to one another, affirming both their cultural differences and the common humanity they enjoy" (Starratt, p. 109).

Palmer (1998) speaks of educational leaders opening up space for themselves and for others journeying into an authentic selfhood. It is in such open spaces that "people feel invited to create communities of mutual support" (p. 161). He acknowledges the difficulty of achieving community, yet expects it most to occur when leaders persevere and call teachers "back to the heart of teaching and learning, to the work [they] share and to the shared passion

behind that work" (Palmer, p. 161).The result in the school setting is authentic teachers who proactively choose to be responsible and present to their students, and who encourage and cultivate authenticity in their students in the pursuit of authentic learning.

Authentic Learning

According to Starratt (2004), authentic learning is a "rich, multidimensional, committed kind of learning that engages the curriculum in its depth and complexity" (p. 56). Such learning is characterized by intense dialogue, multiple research methodologies and approaches to sorting, organizing, and analyzing the data (Starratt). Authentic learning requires unbiased inquiry into the material being learned; allowing it to speak for itself, on its own terms. The learning is "connected to something meaningful in the world outside the school" (Starratt, p. 57). Newmann et al. (1995) reported that teachers engaged in authentic pedagogical practices design lessons to develop students' proficiencies as well as "create assessment tasks that [call] upon students to construct knowledge, through disciplined inquiry, which [address] problems that [have] some meaning beyond showing success in school" (p. 4). Recall Newmann et al.'s findings, stated earlier, that authentic pedagogy has been shown to boost academic performance for students of all social backgrounds. Finally, the learner must take responsibility for what he or she is studying and learning.

In Paterson's view, this education is focused on the "development of persons as independent centres of value whose development is seen to be an intrinsically worthwhile undertaking" (as cited in Jarvis, 1995, Personhood section, ¶ 1). Indeed, "teaching and learning is a dialogue in which the teacher is concerned for the learner" (Jarvis, Personhood section, ¶ 1). Palmer (1993) exhorts educators to "revision education as a communal enterprise….[resulting in] an education that would help students develop the capacity for connectedness that is at the heart of an ethical life" (p. xix). For this to happen, it is essential that teachers become authentic to their students in order to help them become authentic in their own personal lives. Through proactive responsibility, authenticity, and presence, teacher leaders can engender authentic learning in the classroom (Starratt, 2004).

Teacher Leader Influences on the Learning Climate

Leaders lead both by example and by developing others. Therefore, teacher leaders hold a unique position of privilege in their classrooms and beyond (Brown, 2002). Similar to organizational leaders, they can be characterized as sensegivers (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) and managers of meaning (Pfeffer, 1981; Smircich & Morgan, 1982). Therefore, as determiners of which values are salient, teacher leaders can influence the behavior of others, especially through what behaviors they choose to reward or punish. Such "leaders provide the primary impetus in defining, forming, and shaping…culture" (George, Sleeth, & Siders, 1999, p. 545; see also Schein, 1992). These school leaders are "informed by and communicate clear sets of personal and educational values which represent the moral purposes for the school" (Day, Harris, & Hadfield, 2001, p. 53). In so doing, they rely on their own values to guide their actions (Dempster & Mahoney, 1998; Starratt, 2004). However, as Begley (2001) notes, "sophisticated [educational leaders] are wise to distinguish consciously among the arenas of personal, professional, organizational, and social values of their environments" (p. 356).

As this new role of teacher leader is considered, Begley and Stefkovich (2004) stress the importance of personal reflection:

It is not enough for school leaders to merely emulate the values of other [educational leaders] viewed as experts. Leaders of future schools must become both reflective practitioners and life-long learners that understand the importance of the intellectual aspects of leadership, and authentic in their leadership practices in the sense that many scholars have advocated for some time. The first step towards achieving this state is, predictably enough, to engage in personal reflection. (p. 134)

Thus, values-based leadership requires individuals to have established a personal value system as a distinct cognitive structure. The idea of *value identities* links values to identity theory in a bidirectional relationship (Hitlin, 2003; Wojciszke, 1989). Similar to how roles form the foundation for role identities, "commitment to values and conceptions of oneself in terms of one's values are the basis for value identities" (Gecas, 2000, p. 96). Value identities are more transsituational than either role identities or social identities and, not surprisingly, emphasize culture more than social structure, and the moral context of identities (Gecas). When individuals act according to their values, their *true* personal identity is expressed, and they feel authentic, a primary self-motive (Hitlin). It is not the value, as such, that leads to that behavior; but a value identity. Value identities constitute self-reflexive views (e.g., I'm a "good person") that lead to behavior (e.g., helping an elderly person across the street).

Students as well as teachers need to be consciously engaged in, and have certain levels of self-awareness about, their values and particularly their value identities. It is suggested that teacher leaders can help their students develop value identities through intentional interventions designed to raise awareness of values issues and develop personal

value systems. Classroom instruction, accurate feedback, and role-modeling are all effective strategies (Bandura, 1986, 1991; Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004; Treviño, Butterfield, & McCabe, 1998).

Encouraging Engagement

Although principals have their own individual responsibilities and accountabilities, they cannot be expected to handle today's challenges alone. Building a collaborative climate or overarching structure that "integrates and focuses, rather than diffuses" (Larson & LaFasto, 1989, p. 15) allows leaders and teachers to work collectively on school issues. McLaughlin's 1995 longitudinal study of the differences between low and top performing schools found that successful schools had a "teacher–learning community….[and were places] of cohesion, passion, commitment, and extensive interactions among teachers" (as cited in Deal & Peterson, 1999, p. 6). In Newmann and Associates' 1996 study of school restructuring, school success came not only through structural changes, but equally important, a professional culture that included a focus on students and their learning, support for new and innovative ideas, and dialogue and shared power among the staff (as cited in Deal & Peterson). McLaughlin and Talbert found that high levels of collegiality among other teaching professionals led to more positive perspectives on teaching as well as more successful teaching (as cited in Sergiovanni, 1996). The authentic educational leader strives to create authentic learning environments in his or her school through empowering practices that include collaborating with teachers and inviting them to become teacher leaders.

In The Engaged Institution (1999), the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-grant Universities uses the term "engagement" to refer to "two-way streets defined by mutual respect among the partners for what each brings to the table" (p.2). In a similar manner, engagement in this paper refers to a two-way process—an acceptance by a teacher leader of the empowering environment that is encouraged by the school leader. Individual motivation and action is required to become a teacher leader. Further, authentic learning necessitates that teachers be authentic and fully engaged in the classroom so that students can learn how to authentically engage in learning as well (Lieberman & Miller, 2004; Palmer, 1993; Starratt, 2004).

What motivates these teachers to collaborate with educational leaders and their colleagues and to engage in their craft of teaching? How is effective collaboration characterized? The discussion now turns to a closer examination of a collaborative culture.

Components of a Collaborative Culture

Developing the capacity to work collaboratively means dealing with increased complexity and more ambiguous accountability structures (Gray, 1989; Huxham & Vangen, 2000). The requisite set of leadership skills goes beyond merely applying traditional leadership skills in a team environment. For example, Lipman-Blumen (2000) advocates a set of skills she calls "connective leadership" that include effective listening, empathy, and sharing of power. In addition to having internal systems that facilitate collaboration, such efforts also need a supportive organizational framework (Hackman, 1990). Basic components of this framework include clear direction and accountability, sufficient staffing and training, adequate information and other resources, and rewards that encourage both individual and group effort (Kolb, 1996). Hirokawa & Keyton (1995) also emphasized the importance of information resources. Their research found that information resources, along with compatible work schedules, interested/motivated members, and good group leadership were key factors that distinguished between effective and ineffective groups.

Numerous scholars have addressed the properties of effective collaborative groups or teams. In a three-year study conducted with a wide variety of teams, Larson and LaFasto (1989) identified the following eight characteristics of effective teams: clear, elevating goal; results-driven structure; competent team members; unified commitment; collaborative climate; standards of excellence; external support and recognition; and principled leadership. In a later work, these same researchers (LaFasto & Larson, 2001) discovered that five key dynamics are present in successful teams: collaborative team members, positive team relationships, productive group problem-solving, leadership that encourages collective achievement, and an organizational environment that promotes collaboration and teamwork. In looking specifically at the problem-solving dynamic, they found that teams that were able to solve problems creatively and effectively were those in which team members were focused in their efforts, operated within a positive climate, and practiced open communication. Kolb (1996) likewise identified appropriate communication systems as well as clear project goals and individual member roles, responsibilities, and accountability as team characteristics necessary for effective functioning. The next section considers psychological empowerment as an antecedent to engagement.

Psychological Empowerment

Psychological empowerment as a relational and motivational construct has increasingly been the focus of organizational researchers (e.g., Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Spreitzer, 1995, 1996; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990), as

well as business practitioners (Block, 1987). While there is no commonly agreed upon definition, Conger and Kanungo defined empowerment as a motivational "process of enhancing feelings of self-efficacy among organizational members through the identification of conditions that foster powerlessness and through their removal by both formal organizational practices and informal techniques of providing efficacy information" (p. 474).

Thomas and Velthouse (1990) extended Conger and Kanungo's (1988) work by proposing a multifaceted process or framework in which empowerment is operationalized in terms of "increased intrinsic task motivation" (p. 666) and is focused on an individual's interpretations or assessments of the task as the primary source of intrinsic task motivation. They identified four dimensions of task assessments or cognitions: choice (i.e., the degree to which an individual perceives they have choice in initiating and regulating actions; also called self-determination), meaningfulness (i.e., the perceived value of the task or goal), competence (i.e., self-efficacy), and impact (i.e., the degree to which behavior accomplishes the purpose of the task).

Spreitzer (1995) approached employee empowerment from the psychological and social structural perspectives. Using the four cognitions of Thomas and Velthouse's (1990) model, she developed and empirically validated a multidimensional measure of psychological empowerment in the workplace. Additionally, she explored and identified antecedents (i.e., work unit design characteristics) and consequences (i.e., behavioral outcomes) of an empowering system (Spreitzer, 1995, 1996; Spreitzer, Kizilos, & Nason, 1997).

Through her research on the antecedents of empowerment, Spreitzer (1995, 1996) determined that participatory work unit climate, access to information about the organization's mission and unit performance, clearly defined responsibilities, performance-based reward systems, self-esteem, and sociopolitical support (i.e., approval from or legitimacy granted by organizational constituencies, such as a boss, Kanter, 1983) were positively related to empowerment. Spreitzer and colleagues (Spreitzer, 1995; Spreitzer et al., 1997) also discovered from the structural model for the consequences of empowerment, that satisfaction, managerial effectiveness, innovative behavior, and decreased stress were moderately related to empowerment. According to Spreitzer (1992), empowered employees "believe in and care about what they do; their activity is aligned with their value system" (p. 12). These employees are more motivated, "energized", and engaged (Spreitzer, 1992). These findings suggest that employee participation (i.e., collaboration) in decision-making may lead to empowerment and that these empowered employees are more likely to be satisfied, engaged, and innovative. Figure 1 demonstrates this relationship. From the previously noted work of Barab and colleagues (2000), authenticity emerges from collaboration. Here authenticity moderates the quality and extent of individual's perceptions of psychological empowerment.
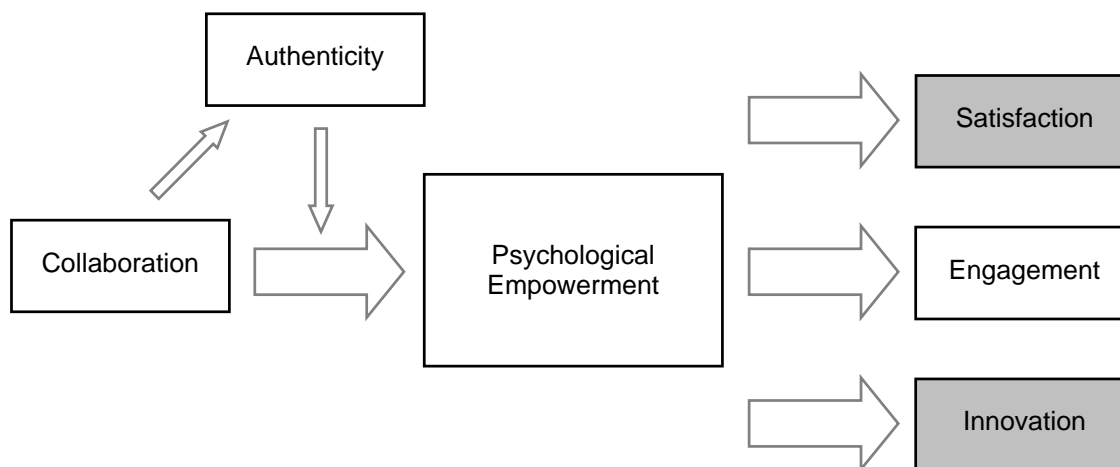

Figure 1. *Empirical Relationships between Collaboration, Authenticity, Perceptions of Psychological Empowerment, and Satisfied, Engaged, and Innovative Teacher Leaders*
Note. Space constraints limit the discussion to one of the three consequences—engagement.

According to Lichtenstein, McLaughlin and Talbert, a broadly defined knowledge of the teaching profession "empowers teachers to pursue their craft with confidence, enthusiasm, and authority….[Of particular importance is] knowledge of professional community…[acquired] as a result of participating in professional organizations and "working collaborating with other teachers in a shared practice" (as cited in Sergiovanni, 1996, p. 141).

Encouraging Teacher Engagement

In this section, practical suggestions, informed by the literature, are offered for putting the model into practice. First, factors that facilitate engagement of teacher leaders are discussed.

Clear and inspiring mission and vision. Most educational leaders are able to identify a clear focus, mission and vision for their schools and cultures through collaboration with their faculty and staff. A clear mission that everyone agrees is important is one of the basic tenets of collaborative effort (Gibson, Zellmer-Bruhn, & Schwab, 2003; Hackman, 1990; Kolb & Gray, 2005; Larson & LaFasto, 1989).

Facilitative structure. Wasley (as cited in Lieberman & Miller, 2004) found that structures endemic to schools can hinder teachers becoming authentic leaders. A hierarchical structure and strong bureaucratic control system designed perhaps to eliminate uncertainty and chaos also can effectively silence any faculty initiative. In terms of daily functioning, the design of the campus and the timing of lunch hours are factors in the development of faculty relationships and a culture that supports innovation and engagement. McLaughlin and Talbert (as cited in Sergiovanni, 1996) found that high levels of collegiality among teaching professionals leads to more positive perspectives on teaching.

Empowered teacher leaders. Empowerment is an essential component for engagement. The principal needs to take steps to create an empowering environment by increasing access to school information, soliciting teacher participation in school decisions, encouraging classroom innovations, and providing some resource autonomy. Teachers should have a say in decisions that affect them, the school, and their students, and the autonomy needed to carry out innovations in their classroom. Participation in professional organizations and other networks of teachers (e.g., from the same academic discipline) empowers teachers by helping them "recognize their own expertise.…[and expanding their] notions of what is possible within their own practice and the profession as a whole" (Lichenstein, McLaughlin, & Knudsen, 1992, p. 43). This can energize and inspire pedagogical innovation.

Recognition and reward for innovation and excellence. Also important in developing and sustaining a culture in which all are engaged is support for pedagogical innovation and excellence in the classroom. In an engaged culture, teacher leaders could manage and sustain such initiatives given sufficient funding and the principal's active support.

Supportive and visible principal. It takes a strong and supportive teacher leader to reinvigorate and sustain passion for learning amidst the daily realities of teaching, let alone the heavy weight of expectations of higher school performance, all amidst an organizational culture characterized by tight controls on limited resources. The example set by the principal's actions, as well as his or her physical presence, demonstrate the values of authenticity, collaboration, and engagement. If the principal, during the course of his/her daily duties, is seen regularly by teachers and is viewed as someone who knows and respects what is going on in the classrooms, an opportunity develops to build a relationship of mutual respect and trust. Such authenticity in the educational leader can also lead to "a broader sense of trust in the school organization among faculty" (Hoy & Kupersmith, 1984, p. 86). Engagement has been defined as "two-way streets defined by mutual respect among partners for what each brings to the table" (The Engaged Institution, 1999, p.2).

Collaborative and collegial environment. Teachers who are given opportunities to regularly interact on projects of mutual interest may develop a level of authenticity in their relationships. Authenticity emerges as participants engage in tasks that have meaning and address a real-world need (Barab et al., 2000).

Group member process skills. Teachers who have reasons to meet regularly to discuss student needs, plan work schedules, and otherwise interact with each other to make decisions regarding work issues have opportunities to develop workable communication and group process skills. Several scholars (Kolb, 1996; Kolb & Gray, 2005; Larson & LaFasto, 1989, Lipman-Bluman, 2000) have identified group communication and problem-solving skills as critical for collaborative effort. Training in such skills may be needed since opportunities alone may not be sufficient for teacher leaders to learn how to encourage and support both individual initiative and group effort.

Implications for HRD Research and Practice

The move toward engagement in our school systems provides numerous opportunities and challenges for HRD professionals to work with school administrators and teacher leaders to help them identify and accomplish their desired goals. The data collected from concurrent applied research/practitioner projects and subsequent longitudinal studies would increase our knowledge of collaborative effort and engagement and expand our understanding of factors that help and hinder change efforts. The opportunity is clear. The challenge lay in creating authentic learning environments. Veteran teachers who may not have recently experienced a climate of support for innovation in the classroom may find it difficult to trust such efforts. Nevertheless, authenticity emerges through meaningful relations" (Barab et al., 2000, p. 42) "as participants engage in practices of value to themselves and to others in the

community at large" (p. 56). As Palmer exhorts, principals need to call teachers "back to the heart of teaching and learning, to the work [they] share and to the shared passion behind that work" (Palmer, 1998, p. 161). By inviting teachers to participate in the leadership of the school, such mission-driven collaboration will effect authentic learning in the classroom. It is paramount, however, that educational leaders and internal HR professionals do the hard work of self-reflection, and model the desired behavior and attitudes necessary for authenticity to emerge from collaborative work.

To further aid in this effort, school administrators must be willing to remove structural impediments to collaboration. Factors outside the classroom that negatively affect student learning also must be addressed. HRD professionals serving in the roles of researcher and process consultant can provide information and expertise to expedite the process. Although administrators, parents, community members, internal and external consultants, and, of course, students all play crucial roles in the creation of an authentic learning environment, teacher leaders are the critical element. A corps of engaged teacher leaders is the linchpin in any effort to improve performance in our schools.

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